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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001060

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DEPT FOR DSS, DS/IP/NEA, DS/ITA, INL, S/CT, NEA/EX AND
NEA/ARP, NSC FOR NICK RASMUSSEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/05/2014
TAGS: ALOW ASEC BA PREL PTER
SUBJECT: THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR LINE ON TERRORISM

REF: MANAMA 802

Classified By: CDA MOLLY WILLIAMSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

¶1. (S/NF) CDA Molly Williamson, PMIL and RSO met for 90 minutes with Interior Minister, General Shaikh Rashid and Brigadier General Zayani Saturday July 3, 2004 at 1100 to discuss cooperation on counter-terrorism and security issues. COMMENT: King Hamad and his advisors have done the calculus on the catch and release decision regarding the six al Qaeda extremists. They have not changed their position on the issue, nor have they blinked at the travel warning or departure of dependents by the Navy. The GOB is not considering rearresting the men unless substantial new evidence is found. We think that they have the evidence to present, but there are no signs they intend to do so. END COMMENT

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THE MOI PITCH
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¶2. (S/NF) Shaikh Rashid commented on the difficult situation we face now. The Bahrainis take pride in the U.S. - Bahrain bond during two wars. He also noted the need for more intelligence sharing in the future. He's responsible for the security of Bahrain and its foreign guests. Nothing will happen if he can help it since the consequence would be too damaging to Bahrain. There is a lot riding on the joint relationship now, 50 years of friendship with the with U.S., major non-NATO ally status, the Free Trade Agreement and the Navy presence, he said.

¶3. (S/NF) The incident involving the arrest and release of the 6 extremist was characterized as a "small item" and we've overcome worse before. Shaikh Rashid was firm about there being no evidence found during six or seven searches (the police originally reported 26 sites were searched) to keep the six men in jail. The Attorney General released the men based on due process, transparency and democracy. The Minister thought the arrests would be appreciated and commented that the attack planning phase had been disrupted or delayed. He stated the case is still being built and asked PMIL about what information had been found on the seized computer hard drives. He was uncertain why the government was being blamed for the quick release of the six extremists and caused the Travel Warning to be issued.

¶4. (S/NF) He focused on getting past this event, looking to the future and working together. The extremists have given press conferences, been cheered by civic leaders and are recognized by Parliamentarians as heroes. The six men are seen as driving a wedge between the U.S. and Bahrain. The Government of Bahrain wants to put this event behind them, move toward the future and develop the closest level of cooperation on security and counter-terrorism issues. The Minister asked for two MOUs: 1) top secret access to documents (these documents are shared with a few Bahrain National Security Agency personnel at this time), and 2) provide U.S. assistance to develop a Counter-Terrorism Operations Center to improve intelligence and law enforcement capabilities.

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THE CHARGE'S TURN
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¶5. (S/NF) CDA Williamson replied that the arrest of the extremists is not a "gift" to the U.S. nor is their rapid release about "democracy." The issue is Bahraini national security, and what steps the GOB is prepared to take in its own interest. The previous 50 years of friendship, MNNA, FTA and ATA are now being looked at differently by the U.S. as a result of the GOB releasing the known extremists. The Navy base is sending its dependents back to the US. The Embassy is being pressured by the Department to justify why its dependents are not leaving also. It becomes difficult to encourage trade and advance programs when Embassy staff and families may depart Bahrain. Several defense contractors and businesses have ordered their people back to the US or will relocate their personnel to Dubai.

16. (S/NF) The U.S. applauds the GOB efforts to apprehend the men, but confidence in the GOB plummeted when they were released 43 hours later. This sends a message to the U.S. that al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations can operate in Bahrain without severe penalties. The only cost to the extremists is to worry about being arrested every few months and then spend less than a weekend in jail. There is almost no penalty for terrorists planning to attack Americans in Bahrain. The public stature of the six has been elevated substantially with press interviews, meetings with civic leaders and support from Parliamentarians. The extremists are now on the street and have continued planning operations. We know about these men but there may be other terrorist cells in Bahrain planning other attacks. The BNSA and MOI do not have the resources or training to know where they are at all times. They must be prevented from operating freely and communicating with their leadership and supporters.

WILLIAMSON